



TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE



Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America* (Scribe Publications, 2009)

The current reissue of Galeano's *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, first published in 1971, leapt to prominence in April this year due to the timely intervention of Hugo Chavez, the President of Venezuela. At the summit of the Americas in Trinidad, Barack Obama was handed a copy of the book by Chavez; weighting this symbolic gifting even further, the book was presented to Obama in the Spanish language version – *Las Venas Abiertas de America Latina*. Well known for his criticism of the United States, the socialist Chavez can be seen on YouTube making his emblematic donation the new American President. Within two days of Chavez's presentation, sales placed the book second on Amazon's online bestseller list, leading one journalist to describe the exchange as a better endorsement than the Oprah Winfrey book club. Three years ago, at the United Nations, Chavez's praise for Noam Chomsky's *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance*, achieved similar results, leading some commentators to invoke Galeano as the 'latin Chomsky'.

Then again, Latin America, 'the continent that appears on the map in the form of an ailing heart', exacts a high price for literary activism, as Galeano's friend and fellow litterateur, Isabel Allende, explains in her introduction (ix). Allende begins by historicising the publication of *Open Veins of Latin America*, which Galeano 'wrote in the last ninety nights of 1970' (x). In the early 1970s, Salvador Allende had just become President of Chile – the first ever Marxist to be democratically elected. This was the time of the Cold War, when the 'Cuban revolution was enough' and further leftist experiments in Latin America threatened the United States in 'its backyard' (ix). In a strategy that Allende sees as 'designed in Washington and imposed on the Latin American people by the economic and political forces of the right' a military coup deposed Allende on September 11, 1973 and installed General Pinochet (x). Further coups followed in other Latin American countries and 'soon half the continent's population was living in terror...[as] torture, concentration camps, censorship, imprisonment without trial' became common practice (x). Thousands vanished, and exiles and refugees fled for their lives. First published in those extraordinary times, the *Open Veins of Latin America* made Galeano famous overnight. A well known political journalist in his own right, Galeano was imprisoned in Uruguay after a coup in 1973. He fled to Argentina, only to find himself placed on the military dictatorship's death list during the 'dirty war', which targeted amongst others – artists, journalists and intellectuals. Forced into exile once more, Galeano went to Spain (x). After eleven years, with the military dictatorship defeated, Galeano returned to Uruguay in 1986. Since those early days of exile, Galeano has been internationally awarded and for both his political activism and literary talent. He has authored countless articles, interviews and lectures and published works of poetry and fiction including his renowned fiction trilogy, *Memories of Fire*.

Thematic concerns with Latin American identity inform most of Galeano's mature work. For literary scholars, the early period of his unique style, sometimes called 'magical journalism', can be found in *Open Veins of Latin America*. More than thirty years on, his voice still compels due to this excellent translation. *Open Veins of*

Latin America charts the history of Latin America from the Hispanic invasion to the present day. Part poetry, part polemic, the narrative is driven by Galeano's moral outrage at the horrifying poverty which is seen as inevitable and native to Latin America. Galeano presents his key premise up front: 'Latin America is the region of open veins. Everything, from the discovery until our times, has always been transmuted into European – or later United States – capital' (2). Challenging the view that Latin America is backward and poor because of its own failure – a loser in the Darwinian competition of history, Galeano continues: 'We lost; others won. But the winners happen to have won thanks to our losing: the history of Latin America's underdevelopment is, as someone has said an integral part of the history of the world's capitalism's development' (2). History's underdogs are Galeano's concern. Documenting inequality, exploitation, poverty, powerlessness and their entwinement with colonialism and capitalism in Latin America are the author's didactic imperatives. To this day, Galeano remains a committed Marxist.

On the surface, thirty years on, Galeano's passionate journalism has dated. Yet, the early part of the book, which details colonial exploitation, still makes for powerful reading. In a continent where slavery and human sacrifice were part of life, the conquistadors – aided and abetted or occasionally restrained by the Catholic Church – elevated barbarism to genocidal levels. As to the later part of Galeano's history, Allende is right to historicize the moment of publication. Cuba is no longer a shining communist experiment. The price of oil is not the same. In the Western world, the collapse of Russia and Eastern Europe has discredited Marxism as a viable political experiment. Nonetheless, Galeano's tract on the exploitation of Latin American resources by US corporations still reads convincingly. Latin America has been invaded 200 times by the United States and always in support of a corrupt dictator. Does Galeano write his history for ideological purposes? Certainly, neo-liberal Alvaro Vargas Llosa, the son of another famous Latin American writer, Mario Vargas Llosa, finds Galeano's arguments fatuous. In *Foreign Policy* he calls the *Open Veins of Latin America* 'a jeremiad against Third World poverty'.

In spite of Llosa Jnr's reservations, *Open Veins of Latin America* has been through fifty Spanish language editions and has been translated into over a dozen languages. Is the new English edition of *Open Veins of Latin America* worth reading? If the book is read ahistorically, the true impact of its initial publication in Latin America will not be understood. However, in the interests of understanding how some Latin Americans may view 'history' differently to their US neighbour; why the 'pink' tide has swept Latin America – where nearly a dozen countries have elected leftist government in recent years – this classic of the left remains a must read. As for President Hugo Chavez, the jury is still out on whether he will prove to be another corrupt, if home grown dictator and whether the hopes of Venezuela's poor can be realised.

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